

Testimony of Sara LeMaster, MPAP
Manager of Government Relations and Public Policy
Community Health Center Association of Connecticut
HB 5130-- support

Distinguished leadership of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee:

My name is Sara LeMaster and I am the manager of government relations and public policy for the Community Health Center Association of Connecticut. I am submitting this testimony **in favor** of HB 5130 AAC student loan forgiveness for nonprofit employees.

I'm here today to testify on behalf of the Community Health Center Association of Connecticut. Connecticut's health centers collectively serve over 380,000 residents every year, and specialize in providing care for traditionally underserved communities. Health centers do not turn people away based on their ability to pay for services, and patients have access to same-day medical, dental, and behavioral health services. Twenty percent of health center patients identify as Black, and 48% identify as Hispanic or Latino. A majority (58%) receive Medicaid benefits¹.

I'm immensely proud of the work that our health centers have done in helping our communities work through the Public Health Emergency. Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, health centers have been working diligently to protect our communities and support our public health infrastructure. Connecticut's community health centers have provided over 930,000 COVID tests and fully vaccinated over 386,000 residents since August of 2020².

This bill would be a powerful tool in helping our health centers and other nonprofits supporting the work that health centers do in retaining their current workforce. By developing a state-based student loan repayment program that offers loan repayment awards for people who choose to work in nonprofits, the legislature will assist our health centers in retaining top talent and support health centers in promoting and advancing health equity. Nonprofit employees currently have access to federally-based public service loan forgiveness programs, however this type of loan forgiveness does not become available until after someone has completed 10 years of service working in a nonprofit or government role. Health center employees that are also health care providers have access to the State Loan Repayment Program, however this program was developed to offer student loan debt relief for medical providers that often have six-figure debt resulting from going to medical school.

Section 2 of this bill creates a program that offers one-time student debt relief awards for employees in health- and health-adjacent roles that have worked through the COVID-19 public health emergency. Health centers have lost hundreds of employees due to the impact of the pandemic, and this particular program will aid our health centers by rewarding employees that have worked through the pandemic by helping to lower their student debt burden.

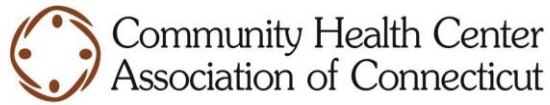
¹ 2021 UDS data

² <https://www.nachc.org/research-and-data/covid-19-vaccine-testing-data-by-state/>

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We cannot afford to continue losing quality staff, and, while we are working to recruit and retain a workforce, our tools are limited. Many for-profit companies are offering student loan debt relief to their employees, and these programs are often subsidized through federal tax benefits for employers. As health centers do not pay state and federal taxes, these programs are of limited use to us. Student loan assistance would be a powerful tool in helping to retain existing employees and also serve as a powerful tool to strengthen our workforce.

Health centers in Connecticut serve many of our most vulnerable populations, and have been absolutely crucial to helping our communities survive this pandemic. The infrastructure required to deliver these services to our communities requires significant input from non-clinical staff, who have been largely left out of student debt relief offered to providers.

Thank you for raising this bill and for the opportunity to submit testimony on this issue.